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**A Meta-Synthesis of Unaccompanied Minors' Experiences with Legal
and Social Services**

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Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family. My mother, Alejandra, grandmother, Elena, and my three siblings; Ana, Daniella and Alejandro, thank you for always being there to watch me grow but most importantly for being there when I made mistakes and needed help getting back up. You have been my drive throughout this whole process, and I would not be the person that I am today without your guidance and support. You never lost faith in me even when I wanted to quit and give up and that alone made a huge difference in my life.

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Abstract

A Meta-Synthesis of Unaccompanied Minors' Experiences with Legal and Social Services

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Unaccompanied minors are characterized as children who present themselves at the U.S. border without a legal guardian and are apprehended by border patrol and placed under the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Initially, many of these children were coming from Mexico, but 2014 saw an increase of children coming from Central America, and this region continues to dominate the overall unaccompanied minor apprehensions at the border till this day (Kandel, 2021). There is a growing body of literature on the interactions between unaccompanied minors and the various adults they meet during and after their apprehension, and the lasting impacts these experiences have on these children (Larrison & Edlins, 2020). This thesis will provide an overview of the existing literature along with historical context on why children continue to make the dangerous journey to the United States, include a meta-synthesis of the experiences of minors, lawyers, and social service providers, and provide implications for future research and practice.

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Prologue

Originally, this research project aimed to explore the experiences of lawyers and attorneys who worked or had previously worked with unaccompanied minors to highlight the ways in which this type of work has impacted them emotionally, physically, or mentally. I wondered if lawyers experienced secondary or vicarious trauma through the work they did, and I hoped to capture their experiences to bring more awareness on ways society could provide trainings and/or support. I also hoped to learn more about the ways in which lawyers felt equipped or prepared to address trauma in unaccompanied minors, due to the possibility of re-traumatization when working with vulnerable populations.

But then, our world as we had known it changed before our eyes. The impact of COVID-19 reached its peak in early March of 2020, as the United States had officially announced a State of Emergency and strictly limited physical interaction in varying degrees across the country. Additionally, protests across the world erupted, highlighting the police brutality and injustice inflicted on the Black community. We are at the crossroads of possible structural change in our country, and this possibility cannot be overlooked as lives continue to be lost every day. It has been important for me to process these two separate events that actually share many similarities together in order to explain why it connects to my thesis project as well.

Covid-19, also known as coronavirus, is an illness caused by a virus that is contagious and can easily spread from person to person (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2021). An integral part of life and overall human nature has been discouraged to ensure the

safety of the public, and that integral part is social interaction. Work environments, educational settings, social gatherings, and so much more have been greatly impacted by the coronavirus. In the past month alone, our society has seen a huge rise of unemployment claims, healthcare facilities and hospitals overcrowded and low on resources, mass graves being prepared to address the mounting death tolls, companies going out of business due to a failing economy, and most recently multiple protests across the country in support of black lives or fearing the government infringing on their liberties to engage in social interaction.

Although many of us have seen, or have even experienced a friend, loved one, or someone we know who has been personally affected by Covid-19, we know that this illness does not discriminate based on social class, gender, or race. What we do know is that access to healthcare, treatment, testing, and overall resources is not easily available to everyone due to a structural system that puts value on one life over the other. Personally, I have heard many misconceptions about this virus and have heard various people interpret what is currently happening in our world in many ways. Now, one thing that we do have to understand is that what is currently happening around us *is* considered a trauma, and trauma is an experience that is processed and interpreted differently for each individual. Therefore, one assumption that can be drawn is that there is not one correct way to feel, think or react right now. It is okay for people to feel sad, angry, hopeless, and at the same time there are people who feel happy, secure, and supported. All of these emotions are appropriate when confronted with a trauma and should be

expressed, but when these emotions turn into actions, such as riots and protests, we must ask ourselves why people use desperate measures to be heard and uplift the stories and voices of those most affected.

Before Covid-19 became a reality to the whole world, our society in the United States had already been facing issues of unemployment, inaccessible healthcare for all, mental health issues on the rise, and overall lack of resources for minorities. The systemic and social impacts we are currently witnessing right now have only been exacerbated by Covid-19, therefore there is an underlying systemic issue that needs to be addressed. Yes, we can say that the coronavirus does not discriminate based on gender, class, or race, but our society does.

To put this into perspective, a recent report showed that people of color are dying at an alarming rate due to Covid-19 (Ford et al., 2020). In a time when minorities make a huge percent of the “essential worker” workforce, there is more exposure and therefore a higher likelihood for an individual to contract the illness. Before the coronavirus, research suggested that people of color, and specifically within the African American community, lacked access to healthcare and services are often denied, and the symptoms of these patients undermined and overlooked (Ray, 2020). This is just one reason why protests and riots around black lives are occurring worldwide; not only is the black community dying in the hands of the police, but also in the hands of the healthcare system. Despite many minorities who continue to show up to work aware of the possibility of contracting the virus, our government has made no effort to provide an

increase in pay or hazardous pay, no loan forgiveness, and no visible sign of appreciation or support.

Furthermore, the racism perpetrated against the Asian community due to the development of the virus is salient and cannot be easily overlooked. Current remarks from former President Trump and the unstable foreign relations with China aided in the formation of the “Asian disease” label that is currently affecting the safety and wellbeing of Asian individuals in the U.S. (Tessler & Kao, 2020). Since the media started covering developments of the contagious illness, there has been a significant increase in hate crimes and overall discrimination perpetrated against the Asian community (Tessler & Kao, 2020). Because of this, Covid-19 does not only affect someone physically, but emotionally and psychologically as well.

The immigrant community has also not been spared from any type discrimination on behalf of the government during these difficult times either. A clear example of this can be seen with the distribution of stimulus checks, as the government agreed to provide eligible taxpayers with a check of \$1,200 as aid relief for COVID-19. Within the immigrant community, many questions were raised as to who was eligible and how someone qualified for the stimulus check. When many people are currently unemployed, even \$1,200 can go a long way in sustaining a family or an individual for a few days. To qualify for the stimulus check, individuals needed to have been paying taxes for the last two years and needed to have a social security number; meaning that many immigrants who use an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) to pay their taxes were

automatically ineligible (Capps et al., 2021). Additionally, if an eligible taxpayer has an ITIN individual on their taxes, then it also barred the eligible taxpayer from receiving the stimulus check. These types of micro-aggression towards the immigrant community further sustains the status quo of anti-immigrant sentiments in our society. Fortunately, with the recent rollouts of stimulus checks, eligibility requirements have changed, which has allowed immigrant families to use this aid.

It is important for people to become aware of these issues and understand the long history of systemic oppression that has allowed predominantly white communities to thrive and succeed in our society while we leave communities of color behind. The reason for this is Covid-19 has made it clear that there are injustices occurring in our country impacting the lives of individuals not privileged enough to reap the fruits of their labor and hard work in this country (Ray, 2020). That is why the liberation of our black community is tied to the liberation of other people of color, including many immigrants currently living in the U.S. The current protests occurring not only across the country, but around the world are proof that people are tired of continuously trying to peacefully advocate for equal rights and justice, when the system is set-up to make you fail. We must remind ourselves that the foundation of this country began with the use of violence, as white Europeans stole this land from the Native Americans to claim it as theirs. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness cannot exist in a society in which every human being is not treated equally. Liberation and justice for the black community will bring upon liberation and justice to all communities of color and marginalized populations.

Due to these events, I have had to change the data collection component of this thesis project to ensure the wellbeing and safety of both myself and prospective participants. This research project will continue to explore and analyze the existing literature with regards to unaccompanied minors, lawyers, and social service providers but no interviews will be conducted at this time. Due to this significant change, this research project will aim to provide a meta-synthesis of the existing literature in the hopes of bringing awareness to how lawyers and service providers can most adequately support unaccompanied minors.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the early stages of this research project dating back to the Fall of 2016, notions and news regarding unaccompanied minors were being documented and made more well known primarily because of the media. During this time, the media sensationalized the vast amount of unaccompanied youth migrating to the U.S. as a “crisis”, but some immigration experts and scholars would argue that the issue of unaccompanied minors making the extremely dangerous journey to the U.S. has been a growing concern for many years (Kandel, 2021). Initially, this thesis aimed to explore the needs, specifically the trauma and mental health concerns, of these youth who were presenting themselves at the border with no guardian. Back then, research for this vulnerable population seemed limited and outdated, and whatever literature was available raised more questions regarding human rights and overall legal representation for immigrant youth. Articles, such as the one by Nestor and Urrutia-Rojas (1990) on the mental health impacts of unaccompanied minors, were rare gems for their time.

Now, years after the massive surge of unaccompanied youth rose to its highest in the summer of 2014, many questions remain unanswered as to how these children are faring today, and how legal advocates are working with these vulnerable youth (Kandel, 2021). With the limited resources lawyers and advocates of unaccompanied youth have at their disposal, it is crucial to have a system in place that addresses the multiple needs of these children in a way that does not perpetuate trauma or re-traumatizes children in the process. Attaining a form of legal relief is the goal, but if children are trapped and traumatized by their experiences, are advocates doing everything they can to help them?

There continues to be a disconnect between legal help and mental health services that needs to be addressed, but the immediate response to this issue is addressing the legal aspects first and then helping with mental health services (Sewanani, 2019). A huge part of understanding the experiences of these minors is not only delving deep into research examining their needs, but also taking a closer look at the historical and political context that exists between the United States and neighboring Latin American countries that have significantly impacted migration patterns.

This thesis will aim to answer the following questions: 1) What are the experiences of unaccompanied minors? 2) What are the experiences of unaccompanied minors with service providers, and 2) What are the experiences of service providers that work with unaccompanied minors? It will begin by providing an introduction on the topic of unaccompanied minors, followed by a literature review focusing on historical context of why people migrate from Mexico and Central America in such high numbers. The methodology of the meta-synthesis is then explained, providing information on procedures and criteria. The findings of the meta-synthesis is then explained, which is also summarized in a table, and finally the discussion section provides insight on future research recommendations.

Summary of Mental Health Trauma

The surge of UIMs coming from Central America within the last seven years has reached the highest numbers ever recorded in the history of the United States. In fiscal year 2014, border patrol apprehended 68,541 children in the Southwest border, and

similarly in fiscal year 2016, 59,692 children were taken into custody (USCIS, 2016). This dramatic influx of UIMs from Central America, despite increases in border patrol, suggests that there are severely adverse conditions in the UIMs' home countries, forcing the children to make the dangerous journey to the United States. The traumatic experiences encountered by unaccompanied immigrant minors (UIMs) seeking refuge in the United States often lead to a range of severe and lasting mental health issues.

A 2014 report from the United Nations Refugee Agency categorized reasons for UIMs from Mexico and the “northern triangle” of Central America (El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala) leaving their home countries into five primary categories: violence in society, abuse in home, deprivation, family opportunities, and other. Over seventy percent of the UIMs that were interviewed fell under the categories of “violence in society” and/or “abuse in home.” These include experiences such as sexual abuse, domestic abuse, witnessing violent crimes, gang violence, religious/racial persecution, extortion and more (UNHCR, 2014). Most UIMs also experience additional trauma on the journey, which adds to their risk of future mental health issues (Ciaccia & John, 2016). These experiences, which were reported to the UN by over 70% of the UIMs, fall under the current definition of a traumatic event in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This puts them at risk for all the trauma and stress related disorders listed in the manual, as well as many others (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Studies show that UIMs have extremely high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders and depression (American Psychological Association,

2016) and some studies have attempted to observe and measure the effects of these disorders on the UIMs over time (Jensen, Skårdalsmo & Fjermestad, 2014; Vervliet, Lammertyn & Broekaert, 2014). For example, a research study conducted by Nestor Rodriguez and Ximena Urrutia-Rojas in 1990 looked at the traumatic experiences that unaccompanied youth could have experienced at their home country, and during their journey to the U.S. According to a table showing the total number of traumatic experiences a child could encounter in their country of origin, 76.7% of the 133 children interviewed for this research had experienced between 1-8 traumatic events (Nestor & Urrutia-Rojas, 1990, p.26). Based on the data collected, “males were more likely than females to have been wounded, to have killed or shot someone, and to have been forcibly recruited into an armed group. Females were more likely to have had a family member killed or to have been forcibly displaced” (Nestor & Urrutia-Rojas, 1990, p.31). One of these events alone is enough to cause trauma in a child, let alone experiencing multiple traumatic events can leave a child suffering from major mental health issues throughout their lives if left untreated. When unaccompanied youth were asked how many events they had experienced during their journey to the U.S., 72.2% of youth had encountered between 1-5 traumatic events (Nestor Urrutia-Rojas, 1990, p.37).

Problems for unaccompanied children do not end once they are apprehended by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for once they enter the legal system, they come face to face with the reality of deportation, and most often, the inability to work. This could be due to legal status or child labor laws that exist in the United States. As Nestor and Urrutia-Rojas found, out of the 133 children, 73.7% had experienced between

1-5 stressful experiences during their migration journey (1990). The overall findings of this research indicate that unaccompanied youth are exposed to various traumatic experiences before, during, and after their journey to the U.S. Although this research was conducted years ago and is very outdated, it provided a steppingstone to the growing literature that we have today. From the works of Keller et.al (2017) on the mental health effects of pre-migration trauma among Central American migrants to the works of Estefan and Hipp (2017) and Sawyer and Marquez (2017) on unaccompanied minors' experiences with violence, this literature has come a long way in addressing mental health concerns for this population. The presence of unaccompanied youth apprehended at the border has not ceased to stop, and therefore more needs to be done by advocates to bring mental health awareness into the immigration legal system.

In recent years, social scientists have expanded on the research foundation focusing on the psychological traits and environmental factors that reduce the impact of trauma and adversity demonstrated by young immigrants (Majunder, 2016; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011). There are several complicating factors with conducting research on children due to the legal and ethical restrictions, which can make it difficult in creating evidence-based interventions (Birman et al., 2008). Additionally, working with federal agencies can be a challenge on its own in being able to develop a culturally responsive intervention for unaccompanied minors (Munoz & Venta, 2019).

The Research Study

There has been a growing body of literature on unaccompanied minors' experiences throughout their migration journey and the mental health implications that come with these traumas, but there is still a part missing that is important to also address. The growing body of literature provides the opportunity to review this information and synthesize data that can be used to support providers that come in contact with or work with unaccompanied minors. There can be many reasons for why this research project has changed and developed through the years to focus on the experiences of the individuals working with unaccompanied minors, but the main factor was due to the significance of Trauma-Informed Care (TIC). In its simplest terms, TIC is an evidence-based model or approach that professionals and organizations can implement with their clients, which centers a person's trauma history in the overall client-practitioner relationship (University of Buffalo School of Social Work, 2020).

Considering how complex the immigration system is, and the various bureaucratic policies and rules that are in place to keep the system functioning in its status quo, one can say that the immigration system is in fact not broken and is working exactly the way it is supposed to be. Strict immigration laws, denials of visas and other forms of discretionary relief, shortage of immigration judges, decrease in translation and interpretation services, and overall increase in detention centers and private prison contracts; it is clear that addressing systemic change for this vulnerable population will be extremely difficult when the system is set up to work against you.

Immigration lawyers are in a unique position, in which they have access to unaccompanied minors and are able to hear their stories, document their experiences, legally represent them, but most importantly, be an individual outside of immigration officers, government employees and judges who could spend time with them. Additionally, service providers are most likely to encounter unaccompanied minors in the community once they are released from ORR's care. The immigrant population may experience varying levels of trauma premigration, during, and post migratory journeys, and this is no different in children (Tello et al., 2017). It is crucial for anyone working with unaccompanied minors, including lawyers and attorneys, to understand the significance of trauma and how it can affect a person's ability to recount their stories, engage in conversation, interact with others, and express emotions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Throughout the years sentiments towards Mexican and Central American asylum seekers have shifted tremendously as more refugees appear at the border seeking help. Since 2008, there has been an increase in immigration from these populations and the United States has responded by making the asylum process stricter and even more complicated (Schoenholtz et al., 2014). Stricter enforcement does not discourage further migration, as we continuously see thousands of immigrants making their way to the United States (USCIS, 2016).

This chapter will provide an overview of the political history between the United States and neighboring countries of Mexico and Central America, which have greatly impacted migration patterns throughout the years. The next section will discuss the business of detention and the profit the United States makes from detaining immigrants. The last section focuses on approaching immigration from a humanistic perspective and the ways in which immigration can become a social determinant of health, impacting people's wellbeing. These three sections provide information that is important to understand the impact of migration that affects children, adults, and the work of lawyers and social service providers.

Political Turmoil

An article by Campos and Friedland (2014) paints a clear picture of what refugees from Mexico and Central America face once they have entered the system. One of the criticisms that the authors give about the asylum process is that the "government's failure

to follow laws, rules, and policies” along with “inadequate funding” for the administration and courts create these hurdles for refugees (Campos & Friedland, 2014, p.4). This reality is further expressed in a graph showing credible fear and asylum for fiscal years 2008-2009, which shows that out of over 35,000 receipts only about 10,000 asylum applications were granted (Campos & Friedland, 2014). There have been various accounts of refugees receiving inadequate advice or not being informed of their rights by immigration officers. Since 2008, more Central Americans continue to come to the U.S. escaping the violence of their own countries.

It is critical to understand why many unaccompanied minors are fleeing their home countries and seeking refuge in the U.S. Garcia in her book provides a history of turmoil in Central American countries, and the roles the United States has played in creating violence and instability (2006). In Nicaragua for example, the United States trained the Nicaraguan National Guard to help keep their enemies weak by killing 30,000 of Somoza dictatorship opponents (Garcia, 2006). In Guatemala the story is no different as the U.S. “continued to train officers in the Guatemalan armed forces, facilitated corporate investments, and provided humanitarian and development assistance to those in power” (Garcia, 2006, p.29). These actions from the United States in Guatemala came after the U.S. received a lot of pressure internationally to stop sending military aid.

Furthermore, in her book, Paley discusses the neoliberal agenda of Mexico and how drug cartels are taking advantage of a corrupted system to make a lot more profit selling the land instead of smuggling drugs across borderlines (Paley, 2014). The rise of neoliberalism has allowed for the displacement of many individuals who have lost their

jobs and other public services in the hands of their governments. Maria Garcia in the first chapter of her book also makes the argument that a lot of the revolts and protests occurred because there was a huge inequality gap that existed between the wealthy and the working class of the Central American countries, and the United States further created instability by providing money and resources to train militias to oppress the poor (Garcia, 2006).

Even though the history of the United States' role in Mexico and Central America has been documented, the impacts of these foreign affairs have had an impact on the people, including children. One of the main reasons for why the United States has failed to do so is because stating the truth would inevitably make the U.S. responsible for all the displacement and violence they helped create and would force them to acknowledge the thousands of people and unaccompanied youth that have fled to the U.S. (Garcia, 2006). There was also the push for a neoliberal agenda in part of the U.S. to gain more influence over the resources of these countries. We start to see an increase in people getting killed and extortions by both the militias and gang members.

Business

Not only have stricter immigration policy procedures made it more difficult for unaccompanied youth to become legal, but also the amount of money that corporations make from the detention of women, children, and men is astounding. Corporations, such as Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), profits from massive incarceration of these individuals. The fact that private detentions are seen as the “fastest and cheapest”

way to solve the “immigration dilemma” is a huge problem that is seen through the increase of militarization at the border and stricter immigration laws (Loyd et al., 2012, p.143). CCA “has been able to charge as much as \$95 per detainee per day in some facilities”, often contracting with other agencies to serve as detention facilities (Loyd et al., 2012, p.145). With the amount of money that CCA and the GEO Group are making, there is a very small chance of detention facilities going away any time soon. Wong in his article also makes a critical point by stating that the detention of individuals who have suffered torture or human trafficking “raises serious human rights concerns” because these individuals are “afforded a dense set of protections under international human rights law” (Wong, 2015, p.120). Some of the continuing problems in detention that Wong mentions are the “excessive use of restrains, lack of access to legal services, and poor or inadequate healthcare” (Wong, 2015, p.121). Too often there are incidents of “physical and sexual abuse, overcrowding, discrimination, racism, shackling, and the use of tasers for disciplinary purposes” (Wong, 2015, p.121). Although unaccompanied minors are afforded a different set of protections, the trauma of experiencing separation and the fear of possibly not knowing where they are, how long they will be there, or what will happen to them is long lasting (Munoz & Venta, 2019). Many of these children are coming over to reunite with family members, who also have their own migration experiences, and so these families need continuous support.

Immigration as a Social Determinant of Health

Although some of the opposition in this issue believe that the government is failing in doing their job to detain these individuals, it is crucial to see this issue from a social-behavioral lens. Dan Cadman is a research fellow with the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), who is against releasing immigrants from detention, aims to highlight how undocumented individuals need to be detained and not released because this action only bolsters more migration (Cadman, 2015). He criticizes many of the proposed solutions that pro-immigration advocates have put on the table with regards to detention. Yet, Cadman offers no alternative solutions besides the continuation and increase of detention and criminalization for undocumented individuals. What people need to do is to start seeing this crisis through a humanistic lens that led unaccompanied youth to flee their countries, in addition to the post consequences that occur once they arrive in the United States. A collaborative journal written by Charles D. R. Baily et al, (2014), discuss the role that lawyers have in bringing awareness to the mental health needs of unaccompanied minors. Baily et al. discuss that although there is some research out there about the mental health stressors unaccompanied youth face in their home countries and throughout their journey to the U.S., “there has been limited research on their mental health needs” (Baily et al., 2014, p.4).

It is very important to know what stressors are causing mental health issues in accompanied minors, but with this information we also need solutions as to what their needs are and how advocates can address these needs. By using the humanistic perspective, advocates will be able to express how unaccompanied youth are not able to

self-actualize because of all the trauma that occurs in their home countries plus what their experience here. Through the humanistic perspective, it is important for individuals to have their basic needs met, such as food, water, shelter, etc., for them to continue growing and developing as a person (Engebrigtsen, 2003).

Since unaccompanied youth are not receiving basic needs at their home countries due to poverty and violence, they are forced to flee because of the imminent danger of getting hurt or even killed. In the U.S. children face further hurdles as many of them are placed in removal proceedings and not given any temporary legal status to be eligible for public services besides public education (Pierce, 2015). Pierce in her brief does provide some solutions to some of these issues that unaccompanied minors face, and these include: a specialized program for emotional support for students with limited English skills, bilingual parent volunteers to help other parents navigate the school system, an entry-level job program for children that will not be able to receive a diploma by the time they are twenty-one, and some other solutions (Pierce, 2015).

These solutions that Pierce suggests are a great starting point in helping a very vulnerable population. By addressing some of these needs, schools can alleviate some of the stress and anxiety that some of these youth face when they arrive to another country that they do not know. It is crucial to have a back-up plan for unaccompanied youth because “most unaccompanied children are likely to remain in unauthorized status in the United States for a long time” (Pierce, 2015, p.12). Without authorized status, unaccompanied youth are not able to receive many state/federal benefits, or even work. Unaccompanied children flee their countries to come face to face with another country

that is not sympathetic to their cause and is unwilling to help them despite those traumatic lived experiences that these youth have faced.

By humanizing these children and the overall cause, more individuals will be able to see how unaccompanied youth deserve a better life and deserve the right to live without fear and persecution (Engebriksen, 2003). Many of the opposition fail to see how this is a human rights issue and only focus on the numbers and the fear of terrorism and drugs to fuel their own beliefs that these children are criminals and dangerous (Engebriksen, 2003). It is unrealistic to expect children to develop appropriately and to self-actualize without having an appropriate environment to grow up in (Engebriksen, 2003). Central America and Mexico are both known for having terrible living conditions for working and poor class individuals, and the violence continues to grow. Specifically, in a report conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) found that many of the unaccompanied youth fled their countries because of violence, and to seek family members or other opportunities in the U.S. (UNHCR, n.d). Even with all of the information that is out there about unaccompanied youth the questions still remain on “how the five States, civil society and UNHCR can work together to best ensure that these children are carefully screened and provided the protection they so desperately need and deserve” (UNHCR, n.d).

Conclusion

Essentially, what is captured and learned from the existing literature is that unaccompanied minors face many barriers pre-migration, during migration, and post-

migration that ranged from physical health concerns, education, legal aid, and heightened mental health issues among many others. Based on this knowledge, I developed research questions with regards to how legal representatives and service providers worked with unaccompanied minors, which I describe in the next chapter. Operating from a limited amount of research regarding the needs of unaccompanied minors in the U.S., it was not surprising to find significant gaps in research regarding the experiences of lawyers or service providers who worked with people in detention in general.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The studies used in this research project encompass the overarching concepts of a meta-synthesis by reviewing and analyzing qualitative studies regarding the experiences of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) with legal and social service providers. The idea of synthesizing these articles about a very vulnerable population brought upon various questions as the primary researcher of this project. Not only was I tasked with learning more about UAMs experiences with social services, such as social workers, counselors, etc., but also highlight a very scarce topic, which is unaccompanied minors' experiences with legal services.

On one hand, picking these two topics could lead to an incomplete or disorganized meta-synthesis project, but on the other hand I could risk passing up the opportunity to bring awareness to an issue that continues to be overlooked and should be seen as a child welfare crisis. Now, there is no denying that within the research community, more specifically, when it addresses children and immigration, there is limited, current research data out there. Even more difficult is the task of finding research studies that focus on the child-practitioner experience when it comes to legal immigration aid or consultation. Keeping in mind that a lot of research projects were halted or pushed back due to COVID-19, there is a limitation to how far this meta-synthesis and its findings can achieve. Despite this, it is important to continue pushing for answers and remain grounded in this midst of chaos.

The main goal of using a meta-synthesis to analyze similar research articles is to develop a new and reflective interpretation of UAMs experiences that could serve as a guide to current or future social service providers and researchers. I hope that with this

meta-synthesis social service providers and legal practitioners can have a better understanding of the population that they are working with, and grasp the tremendous impact, both emotionally and psychologically, their work has on these children. Additionally, I also hope that researchers use this project as a way of expanding their own research studies or developing new ones that will continue to grow the literature on this topic.

This meta-synthesis relies heavily on the concepts found within the social determinants of health framework, which focuses mainly on how social systems impact people's lives. Using the social determinants of health framework, this thesis explores how UAMs in the United States have impacted their relationships and wellbeing with legal and social service providers. The reason for why I chose this framework is because human relationships and experiences are extremely non-linear in general, and our environment and social systems have a significant impact on our livelihoods and accessibility to resources overall.

Immigration, for many people in this country, continues to be both a harbinger of benefits when legal, or a giver of depression, anxiety, chronic stress, violence, and even death for those who are living here undocumented. More so, the experiences of immigrant children can often go un-reported or are not documented due to how difficult it is to gain access to this vulnerable population once they are in the hands of the system. Therefore, research regarding unaccompanied minors is extremely needed, when policies and social perceptions of immigration are continuously evolving within our borders, and sometimes without our knowledge. We owe it to these children, to the immigrant community and to ourselves as researchers, to bring some sense of justice to the work that we do and the people whose stories help us get there.

Search Methods and Screening Process

Two main electronic databases (University of Texas at Austin Libraries and EBSCO host) were used to find articles during the months of February to June of 2020. Search terms used were “lawyers and unaccompanied minors”. “unaccompanied children” OR “unaccompanied minors” OR “unaccompanied refugee minors” AND “foster care” OR “shelter”, “unaccompanied minors” AND “social services”. This project had no time restrictions, which allowed for the flexibility to look at a broad search of articles to find the most appropriate ones for this project.

For studies to be included they had to a) report the experiences of UAMs with social or legal services in a peer-reviewed article, b) use qualitative methods, c) centered on UAMs’ experience in the US, d) be published in English, e) be about UAMs from Central America or Mexico, and f) article needs to be published no later than the year 2000.

The main reason for why some of these inclusion criteria are very specific is due to the importance or remaining true to the research question at hand and including research studies that are current with the times and not significantly outdated. This is extremely important, since immigration policy changes constantly, and thus it is crucial to continue finding new research that can inform this meta-synthesis. I personally, ensured that there were no duplicate studies counted in the final list of potential articles, and a copy of these articles were saved in a folder on google drive.

Although one of the search terms included the word “refugee”, I made sure to exclude articles that specifically spoke about the experiences of refugee children. The reason for this is because unaccompanied minors may sometimes be referred to as refugee children, but they are not one and the same in legal terms. Refugees are those individuals that request protection from outside of the country, and an asylee is someone already living in the host country and is requesting protection from within (DHS, 2020). Therefore, when

speaking about unaccompanied minors, it is referring to children who migrate from their home country to the United States on their own, without a legal guardian. These children are then apprehended by Immigration Customs and Enforcement, and instead of being sent to a detention center, like adults, they are handed to the Office of Refugee Resettlement or other nonprofits or government facilities that will function as their temporary home. I made the decision to include “refugee” in the search terms to broaden the inclusion of articles that may not use unaccompanied minors or children as terms in their studies, but still reported the experiences of these children.

A total of 49 article abstracts were read to assess eligibility for inclusion. Articles ranged from different services and legal providers, such as lawyers, social workers, nurses and therapists. Among the 49 articles, many were not able to be included in this meta-synthesis due to the studies being conducted outside of the US or not centered on the experiences of UAMs from Central America or Mexico.

From those 49 articles, there were 22 that met at least one inclusion criteria, but either did not meet the methods or did not contain enough report on the experiences of UAMs with social or legal services to be included. From these remaining 22 articles, there were nine that met inclusion criteria and contained enough information from which both social and legal service experience with UAMs could be extrapolated. Articles involving legal experience or lawyer-child interaction were by far outnumbered by articles covering social service experience. This only means that there is plenty of opportunities for further research in this area.

Quality Appraisal

To ensure the quality of the research articles chosen, I used the CASP checklist for assessing the quality of qualitative research articles. This checklist used 10 categories,

which are primarily questions for the researcher to consider about each of the articles. Some of these questions addressed the clarity of the research statement, methodology, research design, relationship between researcher and participants, ethical issues, and findings among other criteria (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2013). These questions really made me think about the articles chosen for this meta-synthesis and the overall impact their findings had in helping answer my two research questions; 1) What are the experiences of unaccompanied minors with service providers? and 2) What are the experiences of service providers that work with unaccompanied minors?

Positionality

As the primary researcher, having had lived experience as an undocumented immigrant from a very young age, and from working with therapists, teachers and lawyers for many years on topics regarding mixed-status families and supporting undocumented children in education, this topic is very personal. Additionally, my experience conducting research for the Texas Institute for Child and Family Wellbeing has exposed me to various projects involving underlying immigration issues. I also have a lot of volunteer experience working with nonprofits to visit detention centers to help immigrant families with their credible fear interviews or providing mental and emotional support through the detention process.

Despite this personal background, I also understand my limitations, for I was not an unaccompanied minor, nor did I have experience living in a foster home or being classified as a ward of the state. Additionally, although I have worked with mixed-status families and undocumented parents for years, I do not consider myself an expert in the experiences of unaccompanied minors in any way. As an immigrant, I also keep in mind my positionality in doing this meta-synthesis and the biases that can come from doing a

research project that is very personal and close to my heart. For these exact same reasons is why the end result of this meta-synthesis is important. This project is not funded by any organizations or outside entities but is driven by a need to address a growing problem for vulnerable children.

I also do not want to overlook the great impact that the pandemic had in every aspect of people's lives. This meta-synthesis is also limited in its understanding of UAMs experiences *prior* to COVID-19, which in the future I am sure there will be a new understanding of how legal and social services were conducted in a safe and socially distanced manner for everyone involved. It would be quite interesting to see how ORR, nonprofits, and overall government agencies handled the pandemic to protect the wellbeing of UAMs .

The 9 articles that were chosen to be included in this meta-synthesis were read fully two times. The first time was to grasp a general idea of what the research was about, and the second time was to spend more time analyzing the articles and writing notes on the findings and future recommendations. These notes were then cross-referenced with the other articles, which led to a comprehensive list of key concepts and similar themes found among the articles. A google spreadsheet was used to collect the information needed to create the key concepts and themes, which is represented in Table 1.

Since this meta-synthesis project includes articles about two different topics (legal and social), it was challenging trying to find some common ground on themes that could be used across all articles. Based on an analysis from my own lived experience and the themes present in the articles, I made the decision to create a comprehensive summary of key concepts that could be found among the 9 articles. These key concepts and themes will be explained in depth in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter will focus on providing a literature review of the nine articles that fit the criterion for this meta-synthesis on unaccompanied minors and the experiences of social and legal service providers. Currently, it is difficult to find articles that discuss or research the interactions of unaccompanied minors with adults they meet during and after their apprehension and shelter placement. Six of the nine articles chosen for this meta-synthesis were qualitative studies and the other three derived their analysis from case studies. All of these studies were conducted in the United States and primarily included children from Central America compared to any other country. Research studies came from a variety of backgrounds and included the experiences of lawyers, social workers, clinicians, and educators. A table of the articles can be found at the end of this paper.

Experiences of Unaccompanied Minors

Although all the articles mentioned the experience of unaccompanied minors to an extent, there were two articles in particular that really delved deep in their efforts to understand the migration experience of these children and some of their major reasons for coming to the U.S. Becker et al. (2018) in their qualitative study aimed to fill the gap of capturing the experiences of unaccompanied minors by answering two questions: Why did children leave their home countries to migrate to the U.S?, and how do these children describe their migration experience? This information can help service providers approach their work in a manner that is culturally responsive of the needs of UAMs.

To answer these questions, Becker et al. (2018) analyzed 292 written narratives from Latino unaccompanied minors with the use of a theoretical thematic analysis. The study was conducted at a shelter that was run by a faith-based agency that was contracted by ORR to house these children. Initially, the information and data collected was not

intended to be used for this research study and had been stored for approximately two years before it was used. Despite the lapse in time, the institutional review board believed the data to be retrospective and waived the need for consent. To protect the identity of the children, all identifiable information was de-identified and stored in a secured database.

The results of the study showed three major insights, which are 1) the complex and traumatic experiences of these children's lives back in their home countries, 2) the appealing factors that made them migrate to the U.S., and 3) their migration journey (Becker et al., 2018). It is known that many of the countries from Central America suffer from a huge lack of economic opportunities and ravaged by poverty, which is reflected in the experiences of these children when they express their families not having enough to meet basic needs, such as housing and food. Additionally, children's hopes of going to school or finding a job when they were older was not very feasible due to the severe poverty that some of these families faced (Becker et al., 2018). The children in the study also identified the loss of a supportive relationship as a significant reason for choosing to come to the U.S. Many of the children discussed family separation and the desire to reunite with family members in the U.S., some of which they have not seen for years at a time. Overall, the children in the study stated that coming to the U.S. was a way for them to escape the sociopolitical stressors in their home countries and to find a better future here in the U.S. (Becker et al., 2018). Understanding these hardships can provide insight to service providers to be able to gain trust with UAMs and build that practitioner-client relationship. Additionally, it can allow lawyers the opportunity to explore various opportunities for a potential relief to gain legal status in the United States.

Similarly, Tello et al. (2017), in their qualitative study aimed to gain awareness of the migration experience of unaccompanied minors and to provide implications for counselors in their practice. In this study, the narratives of 16 refugees from the Northern

Triangle that arrived to the U.S. as unaccompanied minors were examined as they were receiving help from a shelter in the Southern part of the US. The findings of their study showed three subthemes that fell under the primary theme of why the children decided to leave their home countries in Central America. These subthemes included: 1) a need to financially help their family, 2) to escape gang violence and potential death, and 3) feeling powerlessness because of their situation (Tello et al., 2017).

The research participants provided many accounts of the emotional and physical trauma they experienced during their journey to the U.S., which included experiences of being beaten, robbed, and sexually assaulted (Tello, 2017). There were different modes of transportation that the children used to travel, including trains and buses, and some of the children and their families' made arrangements with *coyotes* to help bring them over. The most dangerous mode of transportation the children spoke about was the train, which many of them referred to as *La Bestia* or the train of death. There have been numerous reports of individuals falling asleep on the train and falling over to their deaths, or individual being mutilated attempting to board the running train. Additionally, some of the children recounted feeling physical pain from days of walking in desert terrain, often wearing down the soles of their shoes, developing blisters, and even witnessing dead bodies from those individuals that did not make it (Tello et al., 2017). These types of experiences are extremely traumatizing and being able to process migration experiences with UAMs can provide vital information for service providers to better address the mental health needs of these children.

The last subtheme, in this category came from the children's stories of receiving help with food and water from other individuals along their journey. Once in the U.S. the last primary theme emerged, which revolved around the participant's life in the U.S. These subthemes included 1) their faith, 2) their worries for the future, 3) getting help from others

and 4) their view of self after their migration experience (Tello et al., 2017). There were mixed feelings within the participant group regarding their lives in the U.S. Some of the children indicated they felt blessed and strongly relied on their faith to move them in the right path and protect them, as well as looking forward to making a new and better life in the U.S. for others, they felt unable to do anything to financially help their families and felt like they would be judged by the America society and fear deportation (Tello et al., 2017).

Unaccompanied Minors Experiences with Service Providers

In another study, Larrison and Edlins conducted open-ended focus groups with twenty-four unaccompanied minors that were reunified with their families and thirteen sponsors (2020). In their study, they attempted to explore two questions: 1) How do unaccompanied minors and their sponsors interact with service providers? and 2) How do these experiences intersect with the roles and responsibilities of service providers that implement immigration policy? (Larrison & Edlins, 2020). Minors expressed having more positive experiences once they were placed in a temporary shelter and felt more supported and structured by the staff. When asked about their experiences with social workers, minors stated that their interactions were mostly positive and felt like the counselors and social workers were allies in their reunification process (Larrison & Edlins, 2020). The sponsors also felt this way when asked about social workers and noticed they were helpful in addressing concerns that showed up with the minors that they worked with. In most situations, social workers were the individuals that contained the most information about a minor and was responsible to pushing a minor's case forward.

Furthermore, when asked about the teachers unaccompanied minors had similar sentiments. Teachers not only educated the youth in a range of classes, but they also provided structure to the youth's lives and for a short time made them forget about their

situation and have fun (Larrison & Edlins, 2020). In comparison, children's interactions with medical staff had mixed feelings depending on the amount of information that was disclosed to the minor during their check-ups. Usually, when minors arrived at a shelter nurse were some of the first people they encountered, and these minors remember receiving up to fifteen vaccines in one day without knowing what they were for and why they were getting them (Larrison & Edlins, 2020). These interactions for some of the minors created uncertainty and a lot of fear because they were not given any information. Lastly, minors also remembered the tone in which different professionals spoke to them and found that individuals that tried to speak to them in Spanish were more caring and genuine in their efforts to assist the minors. These interactions had lasting impressions in the lives of the minors (Larrison & Edlins, 2020). Knowing this type of information can help guide the practice in which service providers and lawyers interact with UAMs that addresses their trauma and centers their experiences. Body language and tone can convey a lot of information and being a calm and approachable presence for UAMs can open many doors for moving their cases forward.

These studies tell us that there are a variety of factors that we need to consider when working with UAMs from the time they are apprehended until they are released. The physical and verbal interactions that they experience during this process with adults have the potential to influence the way that they approach providers in the future (Larrison & Edlins, 2020).

Experiences of Lawyers

When it came to studies that centered the experiences of lawyers working with unaccompanied minors, it was quite surprising to find that five of the studies mentioned or primarily addressed this perspective. In the first study, Baily et al. (2014), aimed to learn

about the experiences of lawyers working with these children or the mental health needs of this population. This qualitative study included a 71-question survey that assessed lawyer's perceptions of their clients' mental health needs, the way lawyers made mental health referrals, and lawyer's mental health experience and any training they might have (Baily et al., 2014). A total of 26 lawyers who worked with unaccompanied minors completed the 30-to-40-minute online survey, and in addition to answering the required questions participants had the opportunity to share additional information pertaining to the topic areas in the survey.

The results of the study showed that there was a complex interaction that existed between the legal and mental health needs of the clients and their lawyers. Many of the lawyers stated feeling concerned for the mental health of their minors, noticing symptoms of poor self-esteem, trouble sleeping, behavioral problems, anxiety, depression, among others. Additionally, lawyers were also able to identify other stressors related to being in detention, resentment against family and the reunification process, and court-related stressors. When it came to referrals, less than half of the lawyers' referred minors for mental health services, and of the lawyers who did make referrals, almost half of them primarily did so to obtain an expert psychological testimony for the minor's case (Baily et al., 2014). Most of the lawyers who had made referrals believed that a diagnosis, depending on what it was, often helped a minor's case rather than hurt it, but that the utility of the diagnosis also depended on the claim the minor was seeking. When it came to seeking mental health services for their clients, lawyers mentioned encountering great obstacles and in almost half of the referral case minors did not receive any services (Baily et al., 2014). The difficulties presented include, cost of the services, finding services in the primary language of the minor and guardian's language, and transportation. Some of the lawyers mentioned needing the assistance of social workers to help with seeking services

of the minors, and a need for more bilingual therapists. Additionally, some of the lawyers expressed receiving pushback from their client in seeking mental health services due to the stigma or because of what their guardian might think about receiving those types of services.

When it came to answering questions about the lawyer's mental health knowledge and training, around half of them did not feel confident being able to identify mental health problems in their minors or knowing when or where to refer them to services (Baily et al., 2014). From the 26 lawyers surveyed, only two had received any type of training in mental health in relation to working with unaccompanied minors. Despite not many of the lawyers feeling equipped to address mental health issues, a great majority of them agreed that it was within their role to recommend mental health services for minors. Many of the lawyers showed interest in receiving further training, especially in methods of interviewing children with trauma, recognizing common symptoms, and how to access services (Baily et al., 2014).

The article by Roschelle et al. (2018) focused on another major legal gap in services for unaccompanied minors in their qualitative study that interviewed various individuals who worked with unaccompanied minors, ranging from social workers, to nurses, to teachers, and lawyers. Most of the lawyers interviewed agreed that there was an apparent lack of legal services available in their area for minors and their families. One of the lawyers spoke about ORR's various mandates and paperwork, and the difficulties that families have in providing all the documents requested of them to complete the reunification process, which sometimes requires the sponsor to be fingerprinted, and prove family relationship through birth certificates (Roschelle et al., 2018). Sometimes ORR requires an individual to go inspect a potential guardian's home prior to the minor getting released, and families often do not understand the process and are fearful of being deported

or getting in trouble and thus may deny complying with some of these requests. With minimal resources, not enough specialized lawyers, and fearful families, many of these minors in ORR care are spending too many days awaiting to be reunified with their families.

In another study, Marzouk documented the experiences of second- and third-year law students as they represented and worked on the cases of four unaccompanied minor siblings. The law students came from the Chapman University School of Law and were part of the Bette and Wylie Aitken Family Protection Clinic (Marzouk, 2016). The aim of this case study was to highlight opportunities and challenges for practice, teaching professional ethics, and providing an analysis of the legal paradigm as they represented the minors. Additionally, insights gathered from the law student's experiences provided opportunities to engage both clinicians and law students in best practice models to improve overall learning objectives for future students.

From this experience, law students were able to practice case theory analysis and formation, improve their interviewing skills and engage with counseling. They also received a lot of experience working in an interdisciplinary setting, which tested their professional duty in finding a good balance that provided the best legal case and promoted the minors' wellbeing (Marzouk, 2016). From this experience, law students were able to evaluate and critique an immigration system that was traumatizing for many children, and to see that unaccompanied minors are in huge need of legal presentation. Marzouk made the closing remark highlighting the role that law school clinics can play in providing services to these children and serve as advocates to be active responders of this migration issue (2016).

On the other hand, a study conducted in 2019 looked at 40 federal court decision of unaccompanied minors to provide an overview of the immigration system, enforcement

proceeding, provide background on this population and the laws that govern the care of unaccompanied minors in the U.S. Compared to Marzouk's study, this study is more heavily based on the objective facts of the immigration system and its policies, taking a deep look at the ways in which some of these laws can protect but also hurt the wellbeing of unaccompanied minors (Braaten & Braaten, 2019).

Some of the topics covered in this study included the process of apprehension for unaccompanied minors, finding a placement and what is seen as a qualifiable sponsor for ORR, the detention process, and departures, where it's voluntary or involuntary. Although unaccompanied minors do have rights, often the laws in place meant to protect these children by providing them a safe and appropriate housing placement, legal consultation, and the opportunity to present their case to an immigration judge, can often go overlooked (Braaten & Braaten, 2019). The researchers found that in many of these cases, legal agencies were overloaded and could not provide representation to all the unaccompanied minors in the system, that includes thousands of children. Additionally, unaccompanied minors need to be informed of what voluntary departure means and the consequences of signing the form that would send them back to their home countries. Too often are children not explained their rights or what they are signing, which puts them at a huge disadvantage of being able to plead their case (Braaten & Braaten, 2019).

Furthermore, court proceeding can be extremely intimidating and overwhelming to children who are unfamiliar with the process, the roles that different official play, the language used in the court room or relying on appointed counsel and translators to act on their best interest, their rights, and the procedure that comes after the court hearing. During these hearings, children also have no support from friends or family to be there throughout the process, leaving them alone in bearing this experience. Braaten and Braaten (2019) argue that steps need to be taken to improve and strengthen unaccompanied minor's

position in the immigration system by making sure that they understand the process and consequences of the proceedings and informing them of their procedural rights.

These studies further state that lawyers are wanting to learn more about mental health and how to better assist the UAMs they work with. There is a growing need for more trainings and opportunities to provide interdisciplinary work among lawyers and social service providers. There seems to be a clear demand in learning opportunities, and it is just a matter of how, who, or where lawyers can receive access to professional development on mental health.

Experiences of Clinicians and Social Service Providers

Moreover, the article written by Roschelle et al, not only included the voices of legal advocates and lawyers, but it also provided the space for social service providers, such as social workers and teachers, to express their concerns. One of the teachers they interviewed shared her frustration in the difficulty unaccompanied minors had in transitioning back to school once in the U.S. Many of them are far behind their peers in education, have difficulty making friends, speak little to no English, and sometimes have undiagnosed physical and/or mental health issues (Roschelle et al., 2018). In order to address this issue, the teacher suggested having more English as a New Language (ENL) teachers that are experienced in working with traumatized children, overall professional training for educators, and expanding community resources in order to assist the school district with the economic hardships.

A social worker mentioned that many school districts were resistant to allowing unaccompanied children to go to school and would often delay the enrollment process, especially for the older teenagers. A social service provider that was interviewed shared some of the same sentiments as the social worker, and she believed that mental health

services were severely lacking with this population. Under the care of ORR, some unaccompanied minors receive mental health services, but once they leave the shelter having access to mental health services is extremely difficult (Roschelle et al., 2018). Furthermore, many of these children have been separated from their parents and close family members for years, and the reunification process may come with a lot of resentment, guilt, anger, and fear. These immigrant families often work long hours and sometimes even during the weekends to make ends meet, which keeps them unable from spending enough time with the children and reestablishing those familial bonds (Roschelle et al., 2018).

A study conducted by Crea (2018), centered its purpose on providing a deeper understanding on the needs unaccompanied minors that are in long term foster care, and to explore best practices to address these needs. This qualitative study conducted 22 focus groups with a total of 79 participants ranging from therapists to case managers to medical professionals, teachers, legal professionals, and foster parents. The findings of the study showed that some of the pressing needs of children were securing stable and adequate foster placements, promoting community connection, providing education and independent living skills, helping with the acculturation process, addressing medical and mental health problems, and legal assistance (Crea, 2018). These identified needs are based on what the professional perceived the youth's needs were by working with them and may not necessarily reflect the lived experiences of these children. Based on these findings, Crea (2018) suggested some strategies to help address some of these issues, which include providing language training for English, promoting relationships with the community, supporting culturally responsive foster placements, and providing much needed medical and mental health services.

Similar in these sentiments is Munoz and Venta's case study as clinicians who provide mental health services to unaccompanied minors (2019). The goal of their study

was to examine the problems and empirical findings when it came to the decision-making process of referring children to residential treatment for mental health issues. The researchers found that clinicians faced a very difficult choices when it came to referring children due to lack of information, empirical guidance, inconsistencies in the referral process, while trying to make the correct ethical decision and follow ORR's criteria for treatment (Munoz & Venta, 2019). Munoz and Vent (2019) argue that the inconsistencies and lack of information in the referral process could lead to children being hurt by either overlooking their diagnosis or wrongfully referring a child for treatment.

Because of these significant consequences, the clinicians believed that policy changes need to occur to provide additional resources at the government level. Residential treatment programs often suffer from oversight and are questioned on their effectiveness due to a lack of evidence-based practices with unaccompanied minors. Currently there is not a streamlined process on what interventions or psychological instruments are best suited to address mental heal needs in these children. There is only so much that clinicians can do at the ground level without the adequate support of research, the community, and government involvement.

Additionally, these studies emphasize the need to an evidence-based intervention for UAMs under the care of ORR. There will continue to be a need for more services and funding but being able to provide a model of practice that gives service providers the tools and information they need to be successful can lead to structure and transparency on the care of UAMs.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The nine articles examine in this meta-synthesis used from a variety of different data collection processes and included the voices of various professionals and children that have who's lives or work has been impacted by the immigration system. Since the beginning of this thesis development there have been various policy changes regarding immigration, and changes in presidency, that have impacted the overall work to represent the realities of engaging in any type of research that centers immigrant lives. From the historical election of Barack Obama to the shocking election of Donald Trump, to now living in the Joe Biden presidency, this thesis is also a reflection of the impact these U.S. presidents have had on the immigrant community and the country's stance on immigration.

Although there are more articles that address the needs of unaccompanied minors, it is difficult to find articles that provides insight on the experiences of these children with the adults they encounter during their migration journey and while they are in the reunification process. Understanding the lasting impact of these relationships can tell us a lot about the ways in which professionals conduct their work and how this affects the children they encounter. Taking the time to improve the practice can help in protecting unaccompanied minors and their rights.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Many of the experiences unaccompanied minors had with social workers showed that they felt supported, welcomed, and helped during these interactions. On the other hand, social workers felt that not enough was being done to address the growing needs of this population across the board (Larrison & Edlins, 2020). Many of these articles mentioned a need to provide more mental health services or provide more funding for community resources, but these strategies seem to be asked by countless of studies without a clear path

of addressing any of the issues at hand. Service providers are left wondering *who* is going to increase the accessibility of services, and *who* will provide the funding to make this a reality? Advocates could spend years demanding the same ask and still not have these issues addressed.

The article by Munoz and Venta proposed a very interesting approach to addressing the gap in resources and transparency between governmental facilities and residential treatment programs that housed unaccompanied minors (2019). These clinicians believed that ORR and residential treatment facilities needed to have a streamlined intervention or practice model when working with unaccompanied minors (Munoz & Venta, 2019). The social work profession would be great in delving deeper into this approach to develop a practice model for clinical professionals that come across unaccompanied minors in their work. This practice model would ensure that these children are seeking culturally responsive care, trauma-informed interactions, and advocating for the best interest and wellbeing of the child. Additionally, providing a streamlined practice model would ensure consistency in referrals for needs and treatment options, and provide structure for professionals in making decision and fulfilling their ethical obligations.

Some of the articles also suggested additional trainings for professionals or providing educational opportunities to developing professionals to help them feel prepared in addressing the needs of unaccompanied minors (Baily et al., 2014; Marzouk, 2016; Munoz & Venta, 2019). A great way to implement this is reforming the curriculums in licensing programs and universities that are educating the future professionals. If there is a lack of bilingual therapists, then there should be more programs that encourage individuals from diverse backgrounds to apply by also reflecting a curriculum that includes bilingual classes or opportunities for students to practice their skillset. If there are lawyers who do not feel confident addressing mental health needs with their clients, then there should be

classes that educate future lawyers of these issues to make them feel prepared. Professionals are constantly trying to keep up with the best practices and recent information, and university can play a vital role providing an enriching educational experience that will give professionals the tools to adequately help their clients.

Implications for Research

One of the biggest challenges with trying to conduct work with unaccompanied children is having access to them. Since these children are under the care of ORR, who represents the government, sometimes it may seem impossible for researchers to gain access and capture their stories or have them participate in studies (Munoz & Venta, 2020). Therefore, the voices of unaccompanied minors are often missing or being recounted by other individuals that might not fully reflect the lived experiences of these children (Becker et al., 2018). There are some instances in which shelters contracted with ORR may collect information pertaining to this populations, but overall, it is difficult to receive the consent of ORR to speak with or have unaccompanied minors participate in research studies.

There are a lot of different research opportunities available to continue expanding the literature with unaccompanied minors. It would be interesting to learn about the impacts of detention or residential treatment programs in unaccompanied minors once they have been reunified with their families. Additionally, it would be difficult to try and contact some of these minors due to their personal information being protected, so assistance in finding some of these children would need to be sought from shelters. The study by Roschelle et al. included an interview with a service provider that mentioned children feeling complex emotions during the reunification process, which included feelings of anger and neglect (Roschelle et al., 2018). More research needs to be done to examine the

reunification process and parenting practices for families that have been separated and not seen each other for years.

Conclusion

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) continues to receive thousands of children every year, beginning with a record of 68,541 apprehensions in fiscal year 2014, to reaching an all-time low of 30,557 in fiscal year 2020 with the pandemic, to surpassing the 2014 numbers in fiscal year 2021 with 112,192 apprehensions (Kandel, 2021). These children interact with countless adults during their migration journey, once they are apprehended by border patrol, during their care in ORR or contracted facilities, up until they are released from the shelter to reunify with their sponsors. It is critical to understand the ways in which human interactions can impact the experiences and wellbeing of children to ensure that service providers and lawyers are not re-traumatizing or going against the best interest of the child.

Streamlining a practice model and including mental health and bilingual curriculum in universities may present themselves as opportunities to provide direct intervention that can lead to significant long-term change for not only unaccompanied minors, but for professionals as well. Providing direct support to this vulnerable populations may allow them to nurture and promote resiliency during the time they way to be reunified with their families.

Table 1. Articles Assessed for Meta-Synthesis

Author(s)	Objective	Design	Limitations	Findings
Baily, D. R. C et al. (2014)	The goal was to provide qualitative, descriptive information about the experiences of the lawyers surveyed, as opposed to quantitative data from which to draw inferences about the overall experiences of lawyers working with un- accompanied children or the mental health needs of these youth. The study was intended to provide a first step towards more extensive research to address the gap in the literature on the mental health needs of un-accompanied children in the U.S. immigration system.	A 71-question survey titled “Mental Health Referral Practices of Lawyers Representing Unaccompanied Immigrant Minors” was developed to assess lawyers’ perceptions of their unaccompanied child clients’ mental health needs, their mental health referral practices, and their mental health training and experience. A convenience sample of 26 lawyers who work with unaccompanied children completed a semi-structured, online survey. Participants were given the opportunity to write optional additional comments pertaining to each of the above topic areas. The survey was hosted at SurveyMonkey, a service for web-based questionnaires that employs Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) encryption to secure the data provided by participants. It took approximately 30-40 minutes to complete.	This study had a small number of respondents. Due to the recruitment procedure, it was not possible to ascertain the survey response rate or how representative the participants were of the general population of lawyers serving this population.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need for further research and improved service provision in support of their wellbeing. • Lawyers referred for both expert testimony and treatment purposes, frequently encountered barriers to accessing appropriate services, and expressed interest in mental health training. • Responses of the lawyers surveyed are suggestive of a need for more systematic identification of unaccompanied children in need of mental health services, more comprehensive and cohesive referral pathways, and greater availability of services appropriate to their needs. • Expanding mental health training for lawyers should be prioritized as an important part of any integrated program of services for unaccompanied children."

Table 1. Continued

Author(s)	Objective	Design	Limitations	Findings
Roschelle, A., Greaney, E., Allan, T., & Porras, L. (2018)	This research examines how federal immigration policy impacted child migrants at the local Hudson Valley level and the collective response by service providers, educators, activists, and immigration lawyers to effectively deal with the crisis.	Twenty-five qualitative interviews, obtained via snowball sample. Our fieldwork consisted of participant observation and informal interviewing between 2014 and 2017. In New York’s Hudson Valley we attended meetings at a variety of social service agencies, went to workshops on unaccompanied minors, and participated in immigration rights events, conferences, protests, and did volunteer work. We spoke with service providers, lawyers, filmmakers, and activists. Throughout this fieldwork we engaged in grounded theory; a methodological strategy for collecting and analyzing qualitative data that allows researchers to construct theories as they emerge from the data. Qualitative research, no taping of interviews due to funding. Snowball sampling to recruit new participants.	Unfortunately, given the economic realities of a public liberal arts college, we did not have access to research funding and had no money to pay for tape transcriptions. A major limitation of our inability to tape interviews is the potential loss of rich descriptive detail. the interviews: however, we employed this strategy as a way to mitigate that loss as best as possible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While all of the respondents indicated a need for increased funding for immigrant services, none of them specifically mentioned the role of racism in that lack of funding. • Throughout our research teachers, service providers, and activists articulated their frustration with educational inadequacies and with the lack of medical and mental health care available to unaccompanied minors once they were released from shelters. • Throughout our field work it became apparent that there was a significant lack of adequate legal services for unaccompanied minors available in the Hudson Valley. Immigration law is extremely complicated and providing legal representation for minors added another dimension of difficulty to an already challenging situation.

Table 1. Continued

Author(s)	Objective	Design	Limitations	Findings
Marzouk, J. (2016)	The article seeks to engage clinicians and law students in the representation of immigrant children and attempts to articulate best practices for enhancing student learning. The purposeful lawyering of unaccompanied minors in domestic violence-based asylum cases is a meaningful vehicle to teach practical lawyering skills, professional ethics, and critical analysis of the current legal paradigm. In selecting these cases, clinicians will be afforded the opportunity to teach the law of asylum, respond to a refugee disaster, and train the next generation of effective social justice advocates.	The Bette and Wylie Aitken Family Protection Clinic (the Clinic) at Chapman University Fowler School of Law represents survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. Each semester, second- and third-year law students, acting under the supervision of faculty, serve as counsel to undocumented immigrants who are eligible for victim-based immigration relief. In 2014, clinical students represented four unaccompanied minors facing deportation.	Based on the experience of one family of siblings, therefore data could be limited. Experiences are based on a group of law students, there is no clear statement of how cohort was chosen or formed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The representation of unaccompanied immigrant minors provides law school clinicians with endless pedagogical opportunities for the teaching of practical lawyering skills while engaging law students in a humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in the daily news. • Clinicians can guide students through litigation decisions with an eye to limiting client re-victimization. Case strategies should be evaluated and formulated to balance appropriately an attorney’s professional duty to pursue the best legal case and a desire to promote the child’s overall well-being. • Client-centered lawyering strategies can be utilized to minimize client re-victimization. Unaccompanied immigrant minors are very much in need of counsel. Law school clinics can play an invaluable role in serving these children and advocating for procedures to better respond to this migration crisis.

Table 1. Continued

Author(s)	Objective	Design	Limitations	Findings
<p>Becker Herbst, R., Sabet, R., Swanson, A., Suarez, L., Marques, D., Ameen, E., & Aldarondo, E. (2018)</p>	<p>In this article we begin to address these gaps through qualitative inquiry. Therefore, the overall goal of this study was to understand the lived experiences of UUIM youth in the context of migration. Specifically, the following research questions guided our inquiry: (a) Why did UUIM leave their countries of origin to migrate to the U.S.?, and (b) How do UUIM describe their migration experiences? We use the findings to discuss how counseling psychologists can use a resilience lens to promote the well-being of this young population.</p>	<p>We analyzed written narratives of 292 Latino UUIM using a theoretical thematic analysis. Participants described motives for, and experiences of, the migration process. We report on demographic data collected in 2013 as part of the program. The setting of the project was a shelter for UUIM run by an ORR-contracted faith-based agency. It is important to note that these data were initially collected as a requirement from our funders; they were not collected with the intention of research and did not conform to a priori research questions. At the time of the current study, the data had been collected and stored for approximately two years. The data were determined to be retrospective by the institutional review board, thus waiving the need for consent. All data were de-identified and entered into a secure database. Relies on qualitative data.</p>	<p>Both ethical and legal factors serve as barriers to research with UUIM. Consequently, the existing literature is primarily comprised of reviews, expert opinions, and summaries of issues pertaining to UUIM, and largely lacks the voices of UUIM. Second, it is possible that the respondents felt uncomfortable responding honestly and openly to the questions due to the novelty of the respondent–researcher relationship, environmental context, mistrust of perceived authority figures, and possible concerns about confidentiality. Third, variability in literacy levels may have influenced the breadth and depth of responses. Considering that our forms were only available in Spanish, youth who only spoke an indigenous language may have been underrepresented in the data. Fourth, 94% of the sample was male.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The results from our study highlight (a) the youth’s difficult and often traumatic experiences in their homeland, (b) the factors that made migrating to the United States appealing to them, and (c) the dangerous journey they experienced. • Lack of basic resources for survival, such as food and stable housing, as well as aspirational needs to improve respondents’ lives, such as the desire to search for work and pursue educational opportunities. • Youth identified the loss of supportive relationships as an important reason they chose to leave. And separation from family members. • Youth in our study described their journey as a way to escape sociopolitical stressors in their home countries and create a better future for themselves in the U.S.

Table 1. Continued

Author(s)	Objective	Design	Limitations	Findings
Larrison, J., & Edlins, M (2019)	This paper considers the potential impact of street-level bureaucrats' interactions with unaccompanied minors through the questions: 1) How do unaccompanied minors and their sponsors experience interactions with street-level bureaucrats related to the unaccompanied minors' migration process; and 2) How do these experiences overlap with the responsibilities of public servants who implement US immigration policy?	The paper relies on open-ended focus group discussions with 24 unaccompanied minors who were resettled with family members, as well as 13 of these family. Ultimately, this paper considers the potential impact of street-level bureaucrats' interactions during unaccompanied minors' immigration process. The focus groups were semi-structured, addressing interactions with administrators at arrival, in between arrival and placement with a sponsor, and once placed with a sponsor. Questions were open-ended and evolved as the discussion progressed. The project focused on unaccompanied minors who migrated to the US between 2015 and 2017, were between the ages of 8 and 16 when they arrived in the country and settled in the states of Maryland and Virginia.	As previously stated, there is currently little known about the impact of interactions between street-level bureaucrats and the public, especially in cases with uniquely vulnerable populations. This study is not without limitations; it would be impossible to isolate a specific experience of a member of the public as the result of a direct, causal impact of street level bureaucrat behavior, or to extrapolate this experience wholly to every unaccompanied minor. Yet, given the known power differential in street-level bureaucrats' interactions, especially with vulnerable populations, this study aims to co-locate the experiences of unaccompanied minors within the categories of the responsibilities of the public servants they interact with.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth reported more support and routine, as well as better accommodations. • They viewed the actions of social workers and counselors positively. Youth thought counselors were present to assist and reassure them, while the role of social workers was to reassure their parents through the resettlement process, and assist with paperwork to ultimately place youth with their families. • Sponsors also reported feeling like social workers were their allies. Sponsors noted that these social workers were helpful in addressing concerns, Similarly, education in the shelter was generally viewed positively. Teachers within the shelter were responsible for educating unaccompanied youth while they waited to be placed with their sponsors. • Views of the medical staff were mixed depending on the amount of information they provided to youth.

Table 1. Continued

Author(s)	Objective	Design	Limitations	Findings
<p>Braaten, C., & Braaten, D (2019)</p>	<p>This article analyses United States (US) federal court jurisprudence to determine the legal rights of unaccompanied alien children (UAC) in various stages of immigration enforcement proceedings. After briefly discussing statistics on UAC in the US, it explains the legal context of US laws governing unaccompanied minors.</p>	<p>The WESTLAW database contains electronic copies of all published and unpublished court decisions. A keyword search was used to gather cases on UAC decided by all federal courts in the US. The advanced search parameters required that the term ‘unaccompanied alien child’ appeared in the main body of the case (N = 112). The authors then read each case individually and determined that not all cases were relevant to the article, either because the case did not involve UAC or did not contain sufficient facts to enable full analysis. Also, some cases were repeated because of the appeal process through the federal courts. The authors conducted an inductive doctrinal analysis to synthesize 40 federal court decisions on the procedural rights of UAC under current US immigration laws.⁵⁵</p>	<p>The primary methodology in this study was a case analysis of major cases pertaining to UAC. The study utilized inductive doctrinal analysis to identify, categorize, and analyse pertinent legal issues decided at various stages of immigration enforcement against UAC. This approach allowed understanding of how federal courts have interpreted and expanded the rights of UAC but it is limited in understanding the political and ethical dimensions of US policy towards UAC.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The main legal issues addressed in this article cover the broad terrain of UAC apprehension, placement with a qualified sponsor or institution, detention, and departure. • These proceedings are overwhelmingly intimidating for an unaccompanied minor who may be unfamiliar with the roles of various officials, the language used in the proceedings, the procedure that must be followed, and their substantive or procedural rights. • Frequently, these UAC lack the presence and support of family and friends during these proceedings. They also have to rely on appointed counsel and translators (when available) to communicate the nature of the proceedings to them. • Steps must be taken to strengthen the position of UAC and ensure that they understand the nature and consequences of the proceedings, as well as their procedural rights during these proceedings.

Table 1. Continued

Author(s)	Objective	Design	Limitations	Findings
<p>Tello, A., Castellon, N., Aguilar, A., & Sawyer, C. (2017)</p>	<p>The purpose of this study was to gain awareness of the journey experienced by unaccompanied minors from their countries of origin to the United States and to provide implications for counselors. Therefore, the following research question guided the study: What are the experiences of unaccompanied refugee minors from the Northern Triangle of Central America?</p>	<p>This study examined the narratives of 16 refugees from the Northern Triangle who arrived in the United States as unaccompanied minors. Thematic analysis, a qualitative methodological approach, was utilized because the researchers were analyzing written narratives. Thematic analysis, unlike content analysis, provides a rich and detailed description of the data (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). This research study was approved by the researchers' institutional review board. The researchers analyzed the narratives of 16 participants. All the participants entered the United States as unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle of Central America (i.e., El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala) and were receiving assistance through a shelter in the Southern region of the United States.</p>	<p>The effectiveness of particular trauma-focused therapies with this population is an area that needs further exploration. For instance, TF-CBT is considered an evidence-based treatment approach with children and adolescents who have experienced trauma (Scheeringa, Weems, Cohen, Amaya-Jackson, & Guthrie, 2011; Silverman et al., 2008). However, there is limited understanding of TF-CBT's effectiveness with unaccompanied refugees from Central America. Also, examining culturally competent strategies of implementing TF-CBT with this population is warranted.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All the participants discussed factors that contributed to them fleeing their countries of origin. Three subthemes fell under the primary theme of what led the participants to leave Central America: (a) to financially help family, (b) to escape gang violence and death, and (c) powerlessness. • The participants provided various accounts of physical and emotional trauma experienced on their journey to the United States. • Even though the participants experienced physical and emotional trauma on their journey to the United States, they met individuals along the way that provided assistance. • The last primary theme related to the participants' life in the United States. Four subthemes emerged from the participants' narratives: (a) faith, (b) worries about the future, (c) help from others, and (d) view of self after the journey.

Table 1. Continued

Author(s)	Objective	Design	Limitations	Findings
Crea, T. (2018)	The purposes of this study are to help provide a deeper understanding of the needs UC primarily from Central America while in LTFC, and to explore how best practices can be shaped to meet these unique needs. (1) What are the unique needs of unaccompanied children in long term foster care, as perceived by professionals and caregivers who serve them? and (2) What are current strategies being used in the field to serve these children?	the current qualitative study Analysis of data followed a grounded theory approach of open and axial coding to develop themes. "from 22 focus groups with professionals and foster parents (n = 79) in two large organizations serving unaccompanied children in LTFC, " Focus groups were held at each site in Spring 2016, for the following groups: senior agency administration; case managers; therapists; medical professionals; teachers and educational professionals; legal professionals; and foster parents. In the Midwestagency, 13 focus groups were conducted (with 47 respondents overall), and 9 focus groups were conducted in the Northeast agency (with 32 respondents overall), for a total of 22 focus groups with 79 respondents. Results are not disaggregated by groups to avoid the possibility of de-ductive disclosure. Semi-structured format with notes and audio recording.	The study is qualitative in nature, and the results therefore cannot be generalized to the population of unaccompanied youth or to the professionals working with them. Focus groups were conducted with service providers and adults who were speaking on behalf of the youth; the timeline of the original period of data collection did not allow for speaking with youth themselves, although our research team is currently engaged in such an effort. Thus, these opinions may not reflect the lived experiences of the youth served. This study utilized the two largest LTFC agencies within the LIRS network in order to increase participation and data collection. However, smaller agencies may operate differently, especially those without the additional oversight and support of a national organization such as LIRS.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most pressing needs of children in care include securing appropriate and stable foster placements for youth; promoting connections in the community; ensuring adequate education and independent living skills; difficulties with acculturation; trauma and mental health issues; medical issues and issues related to legal status. • Current strategies to address these issues include supporting culturally competent foster placements; providing English-language training; promoting relationships in the community such as mentors; and providing health and health-related services.

Table 1. Continued

Author(s)	Objective	Design	Limitations	Findings
<p>Muñoz, C., & Venta, A. (2019)</p>	<p>The aim of this review is to discuss challenges facing clinicians who provide psychological services to youth who migrated alone and, thus, are without a guardian in the U.S. and are facing emotional and behavioral distress that is sufficient to warrant consideration of residential treatment</p>	<p>The current paper represents the experience of two clinicians who provide psychological assessment services to recently immigrated, unaccompanied minors in the Southwestern U.S. and examines practical problems and empirical findings related to the decision-making process of referring an unaccompanied minor to RT for mental health problems.</p>	<p>Limitations in the data available, more interviews needed. It should be noted that several ethical and practical issues make research with this population difficult: who has the right to consent to research for unaccompanied minors; how can researchers protect confidentiality—particularly regarding immigration status; how can research findings honor within group differences; will federal agencies comply with research that potentially exposes ineffective practices within their facilities? These questions, among many others, are serious barriers that must be addressed to pursue the following directions for future research.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinicians are faced with difficult choices, insufficient information, and virtually no empirical guidance. • Additionally, policy changes are needed and likely require additional resources allocated at the government level. • State agencies should be vigilant in inspecting and monitoring facilities by focusing on evidence-based outcomes for youth mental health, in addition to the staffing and safety requirements that are already assessed • RTs should be classified according to their adoption of evidence-based practices and their effectiveness in reducing problem behaviors and symptoms. Relatedly, reform regarding the licensing and classification of these facilities is required at a national level to avoid the confusion of terms that currently faces RTs and hinders comprehensive research on their effectiveness

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